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STAT

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- THE RUSSIANS ARE ON THEIR WAY TO DEPLOYING MORE SS-20 INTERMEDIATE RANGE MISSILES THAN NATO OFFICIALS ANTICIPATED AND THIS COULD RESULT IN A LARGER WARHEAD GAP IN THE SOVIETS' FAVOR, A DEFENSE OFFICIAL SAID FRIDAY.

"THEY ARE NOW GOING BEYOND THE NUMBER WE PROJECTED IN 1979," WHEN NATO AGREED TO TRY TO COUNTER THE SS-20 BUILDUP WITH PLANS TO DEPLOY NEW LONG-RANGE THEATER NUCLEAR MISSILES BY THE MID-1980S, SAID THE OFFICIAL, WHO BRIEFED NEWSMEN UNDER RULES PROTECTING HIS ANONYMITY.

HE SAID NATO INTELLIGENCE "ASSUMED A TAPERING OFF THAT WE NOW THINK WILL NOT TAKE PLACE AND BY THE END OF THIS YEAR, WE EXPECT THEY WILL REACH OUR ORIGINAL PROJECTION FOR SS-20 END STRENGTH," HE SAID. "CLEARLY, THEY ARE GOING BEYOND THAT,"

THE SS-20 IS A MOBILE MISSILE WITH A RANGE OF ABOUT 2,750 MILES. DEPLOYED IN WESTERN RUSSIA, EACH MISSILE IS EQUIPPED WITH THREE NUCLEAR WARHEADS WHICH COULD REACH ALL OF WESTERN EUROPE.

THE DEFENSE OFFICIAL SAID THAT ACCORDING TO THE MOST RECENT INTELLIGENCE, THE RUSSIANS NOW HAVE ABOUT 250 SS-20 LAUNCHERS IN PLACE. HE DID NOT SAY SO, BUT IT IS KNOWN THAT A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF THESE FACE CHINA AND THUS ARE NOT A THREAT TO NATO UNLESS REDEPLOYED. HE DID NOT GIVE A FIGURE FOR THE OLD NATO PROJECTION OF END STRENGTH OR ANY NEW ONE.

THIS OFFICIAL GAVE NO NEW ESTIMATE OF THE ULTIMATE FORCE OF SS-20S THAT MAY BE ARRAYED BY THE SOVIETS.

FORMER DEFENSE SECRETARY HAROLD BROWN'S FINAL REPORT TO CONGRESS LAST JANUARY SAID THAT ABOUT 180 SS-20 LAUNCHERS WERE IN PLACE. THE OFFICIAL WHO MET REPORTERS FRIDAY SAID "THE PACE HAS INCREASED."

THE NATO NATIONS AGREED IN 1979 ON DEPLOYMENT BY THE U.S. OF 572 PERSHING II BALLISTIC MISSILES AND NEW GROUND-LAUNCHED CRUISE MISSILES BY LATE 1983. THESE MISSILES, WITH A RANGE OF 1,500 MILES, COULD REACH RUSSIAN TARGETS.

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